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## 'Live Sightings' in Laos

Although U.S. involvement in the Southeast Asia conflict ended more than nine years ago, many Americans are still haunted by an anguishing possibility: that American prisoners of war are still alive, still hoping against dwindling hope that they have not been abandoned by their government.

Unfortunately, the evidence has been inconclusive. There have been hundreds of reports by refugees claiming to have seen living Americans in prison camps—but so far these "live sightings" have been impossible to confirm.

Recently declassified documents and other information reviewed by my associates Donald Goldberg and Dale Van Atta lend credence to the belief that, at least in Laos, live American prisoners were left behind, and that some may still survive in the green hell of some jungle prison camp.

The CIA and the U.S. military conducted a secret war in Laos in the late 1960s and early 1970s, trying to destroy North Vietnamese sanctuaries along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There were bombing raids and clandestine intelligence missions into Laos, and by war's end 559 Americans were listed as missing in action there.

Unlike the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the government of Laos maintains diplomatic relations with the United States. Yet while Laotian cooperation in finding and identifying the remains of dead Americans has improved in recent years, the mystery of possible living Americans has scarcely been addressed. Here is the evidence that gives POW-MIA families both faint hope and continuing frustration:

- As recently as June 25, the National Security Council wrote that the White House was "investigating almost 200 live sightings at the present time." In a letter to a family member, the NSC gave this convoluted assessment of the situation: "Our position is that this information precludes ruling out the possibility of prisoners still being held, and we operate under the assumption that at least one American is still in captivity."

- A series of six CIA reports, dated from early 1967 to late 1970, asserted that American POWs definitely were being held in Laos. As early as Jan. 21, 1967, the CIA had an aerial photograph of a POW camp, and by November of that year its presence was confirmed by ground sources.

By October 1968 CIA agents identified five prison camps where Americans were being held. In the next few months the number of camps sighted had risen to 10, and by the end of 1969, CIA agents on the ground had confirmed 45 separate POW complexes in Laos. A total of 68 Americans was known to be held in Laotian camps, but the government has never released any alive.

- The Defense Intelligence Agency, which has taken chief responsibility for the POW-MIA situation, still receives significant information from refugees. During the past three years, 1,516 refugees reported evidence of Americans held in Southeast Asia. Of that number, 313 reported firsthand sightings of live Americans. As of December 1981, 24 witnesses had reported seeing American captives in Laos, and 18 additional sightings have been reported since then.

- A State Department cable dated May 12, 1971, disclosed that a source approached the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, and offered to arrange a meeting with a Laotian prince who would sell 30 American prisoners for around \$250,000 apiece. "No money would have to be paid until prisoners were actually delivered," the cable stated. Embassy officials stalled, suggesting that the prince contact U.S. officials directly, and requested advice from the State Department.

A month later, the contact approached embassy officials again, according to another cable. This time, presumably acting on advice from Foggy Bottom, the embassy rejected the proposed deal on grounds that it would be too dangerous for the POWs.

- An intriguing but unconfirmed report came from a refugee who claims to have been a resistance fighter in Vietnam. He said that on April 26, 1982, while on a mission to establish contact with Royal Lao resistance, he happened upon a secret prison camp in northern Laos, near the Vietnamese border.

The refugee said the camp was surrounded by thick forest and impenetrable mountains, and was guarded by a battalion of Laotian border police. The refugee claimed that as many as 50 Americans were being held in the camp. He even provided intelligence debriefers with a map of the region and the location of the secret POW camp.

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